

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Kylie Knott, “Rounds of applause: Paul Pfeiffer’s art brings home the visceral sounds of boxing,” *South China Morning Post*, 21st November 2015

For his latest work, on show in Central, the internationally acclaimed American artist recreated the noises of the Mayweather-Pacquiao fight then married them to footage of the bout



Paul Pfeiffer

Pound a slab of raw pork with a fast-moving fist and you’ll hear a sound similar to that of a boxer hitting his opponent. It’s a primal and at times flinch-inducing noise, and one that dominates the multi-channel audio and video installation *Three Figures in a Room* by US visual artist Paul Pfeiffer, which is on display at Galerie Perrotin in Central until January .

For his first solo exhibition in the city, Pfeiffer has turned the spotlight on May’s over-hyped boxing match between American Floyd Mayweather and Filipino Manny Pacquiao in Las Vegas. On exiting the gallery’s 17th-floor lift, the sounds of the fight hit you hard – but it’s not the original sounds you hear but the sounds of the fight pared down to their most visceral.

The cheers of the star-studded crowd (Justin Bieber, Beyoncé, Jay Z, Robert De Niro, Andre Agassi, Steffi Graf, Jake Gyllenhaal, Michael Jordan, Clint Eastwood – to name a few – were there) and the hyperactive commentary we’ve come to associate with US sportscasters have been replaced with the magnified sounds of punches, footwork, grunting, breathing and verbal exchanges between the boxers.

However, these manufactured sounds have been added by Pfeiffer, mapped to the four corners of the gallery space – much like the four corners of a boxing ring – so we feel as if we are ringside. Images of the boxers are projected onto a screen, but Pfeiffer has also manipulated the visuals so, at times, when circling each other in the ring, their bodies dissolve into shimmering clouds of colour, at other times merging into each other and at other times sped up.

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The immersive experience is both surreal and exhilarating.

It's a Friday morning and Pfeiffer, giant coffee in hand, looks fresh considering it was the show's opening the night before. "This is an ambitious project – it was uncharted territory and technically challenging," says Pfeiffer as he walks his way through the exhibit.

"While I like sports, I'm not a huge sports fan. I think Manny's story – working-class hero from a poor background reaches great heights in the athletic world – is an amazing one. But my interest in boxing is like my interest in all sports – it's how modern sports today have tones of first-century gladiatorial combat."

Pfeiffer says the work also explores a media-obsessed culture, a theme common in his work that has seen him exhibit worldwide – from the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York to galleries in Spain, Britain and Germany. "I was less interested in the retelling of the fight itself and more interested in telling a story of that place between these two spaces."

That other space is the adjoining room of the gallery where a second video, also synced to the fight, gives the viewer a glimpse into the foley production process – the process in which everyday sound effects are added to film, video and other media in post-production to enhance audio quality. This video is a detailed portrait of two seasoned foley artists practising what's becoming a rare craft in the era of digital film production. Working close to naked in front of the microphone, their performance on the foley stage is every bit as primal as that of the boxers in the ring.

"Foley is a really interesting facet of the film industry – the best way I can describe it is like in the olden days when radio shows used all sorts of props and techniques to create sounds."

Frozen romaine lettuces can make sounds like bones breaking or heads being injured, and coconut shells cut in half and stuffed with padding can sound like horses' hooves.

"But foleys also play a vital role today – every Hollywood soundtrack is applied to a film or image after the image has been made."

After hearing that the world's best foley artists were those who worked on Wong Kar-wai's 2000 hit *In the Mood for Love*, Pfeiffer made it his mission to find them, travelling to a studio in Bangkok.

"The two actors are almost 70 years old and they work every day from 9am to 5pm producing sounds for whatever movie they are making that day ... they were very amused when I said I wanted to recreate the sounds for the entire Mayweather/Pacquiao fight.

"It's all done in real time – they have a stage and they watched the boxing match on a big screen surrounded by a load of props that they customised to simulate the sounds. It's a laboured process: step one is to make the sound of footsteps on the canvas, step two is the sound of shifting fabric of the boxers' shorts. The punches sound very moist and meaty, but it's not as simple as every punch being a punch into a slab of meat.

"They had 20 different ways to make a punch sound. Some times they'd wrap the microphone in plastic and put it inside the meat and other times they would use boxing gloves. It's all very mundane and methodical, and during the process they were almost naked, stripped down to their shorts so they didn't make too much noise."

A third room in the gallery contains video works including the "Caryatids" series of small, tabletop video installations showing boxers being punched in high definition and in slow motion. In these brutal sequences, the image of impact becomes the object of focus, but the attacking opponent has been erased, leaving the receiver of blows alone in the spotlight, body twisting and crumpling as it is hit again and

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again. Images of the body being battered by an invisible force, muscles rippling and sweat droplets spraying wide with each blow, can at times be hard to watch.

Another image of a lone basketballer, jumping high towards the basket, and part of his “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” series, is also on show.

Like much of his work, all of the works are about appropriating footage from public sources and digitally manipulating it to challenge the way that society passively absorbs information.

His painstaking works are also testament to his patience. “The whole digital process of removing images from my work is a long and hard one. It can take four months just to produce a two-minute video.”

Three Figures in a Room by Paul Pfeiffer, Galerie Perrotin, 17/F, 50 Connaught Road Central, until January 9. Inquiries: 3758 2180

<http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-entertainment/article/1880210/rounds-applause-paul-pfeiffers-art-brings-home-visceral>